

Ardenne

Jean-Claude Nicolas

Over the course of a decade, Jean-Claude Nicolas crisscrossed the Ardennes, visiting all of the region's 519 surviving cemeteries. His mementos were the roses that still grew there, and his objective became the saving of these roses and ultimately their return to their home. One person, on his own, traversed an area the size of the American state of Delaware to find and save historic roses.

My passionate research into the old roses in every cemetery of the Ardennes began on September 9, 1992, in the tiny village of Villers-le-Tourneur, situated in France's Pays-des-Crêtes. From 1992 to 2002, I visited 503 communities and 519 cemeteries. On June 11, 2002, I reached the end of the long journey from Condé-les-Autry at Signy-le-Petit and from Chateau Avaux to Signy Montlibert in the village of Rançonnes at the tip of the Pointe de Givet—a journey in which I discovered old roses in 164 cemeteries.

Among the roses found most frequently in these cemeteries were the following:

- *Rosa alba* (single or double), on 53 sites
- *Rosa gallica officinalis*, on 32 sites
- HERMOSA, on 28 sites
- *Rosa centifolia*, on 27 sites

Among the Gallica roses found on fifteen sites were eight varieties to which I could not put a name. ROSE DE RESCHT, closely related to the Damasks, was present on seven sites.

The floriferous Polyantha MARIE PAVIÉ, bred in Lyon in 1888, was found on five sites, and BLUSH NOISETTE, on three sites. Finally, a very floriferous Damask was found on three sites, and a single Damask that gave an appreciable number of autumn flowers was found only once.

Roses found on five sites posed a serious identification problem. These roses, which I call “Bengaliques,” are probably first generation hybrids between Bengal roses (also known as China roses), and Gallicas. Displaying the characteristics of



"Alba rosea from Renwez". Photo by Jean-Claude Nicolas.

both parents, they were very floriferous, with lush, tough growth. Their foliage also had a nice autumn coloration.

The identification of these roses is not always easy, especially during dormancy when the only indicators are the coloring of the bark of this year's stems and the shape of the prickles. In spring when the foliage develops, new indicators become helpful, but we must wait for the flowers to place a rose accurately in the class to which it belongs. And so for the roses in some cemeteries, I made return trips in June to make a definite identification.

A word about these rustic roses growing by abandoned graves. They have survived severe winters (February 1956, the long winter of 1962 to 1963, January 1985), untreated diseases, competition from weedy vegetation, such as bindweed, grasses, and brambles. Shorter than normal, often poorly pruned due to lack of experience, these beautiful old cemetery roses are among the most remarkable examples of natural selection.

By 1995 what began as nothing but an inventory had become a concerted effort to combat the rapid disappearance of these old roses from cemeteries through the vandalization of abandoned tombs and the often intemperate use of aggressive herbicides. I began revisiting as many cemeteries as possible in autumn to collect suckers and take cuttings of the endangered plants. Consequently, my garden became a kind of spa, a refuge for the endangered roses of the Ardennes. I achieved some spectacular recoveries, but also suffered irreversible losses. Over the years, the garden took on the appearance of a mini-conservatory, which delighted me but at the same time worried my wife who hoped that all this work was not in vain.

Throughout 2001, I dreamed of repatriating those roses that had prospered for six years under my care. With the support of the municipality of Sery, a small village located where the farmland abuts the first peaks of the Ardennes—a village I had come to know well in living there for six years—a small heritage rose garden was established with suckers taken from my garden as well as cuttings that I had carefully nurtured for a year. In the autumn of 2001 and again in 2002, volunteers from the village planted 25 varieties.



ABOVE: “Damask Perpetual from Remonville”.
RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Belle de Téhéran
(Little White Pet) from Joigny-sur-Meuse,
“Damask from Remilly les Potées”, “Rosier de
St Pierremont” (*R. gallica* x *R. chinensis*).
Photos by Jean-Claude Nicolas.

This modest planting stirred interest and became a kind of model. The Rural Cultural Center of Launois-sur-Vence proposed to establish a second heritage rose garden filled with more roses at the site of the 17th century horse relay station for Royal Mail. What could be a more suitable home for old roses? And as good things never arrive singly, the president of the Association for the Development of the Pays-des-Crêtes, in collaboration with the Heritage Center, proposed to build a “Path of Roses.”

After a thorough preparation of the ground, passionate volunteers set to work on the design and planting of the rose garden. All realized that weeding, pruning, fertilizing, and keeping suckers under control would be regularly required, but that these tasks would furnish opportunities for friendly and fruitful exchanges. On November 22, 2003, the sixtieth rose was planted in the *Roseaie du Patrimoine*



Ardenmais in Launois-sur-Vence. At the same time, the Path of Roses was under way. It will connect ten rural communities in the Porcien region. Each has agreed to plant a site in their village with a mass of one or several of the varieties gathered in the collection. And on June 19, 2004, the rose garden, which contains three plants each of twenty varieties, was officially inaugurated at the 29th Regional Festival of the Art and Design Trades.

Although the year 2003 was the culmination of a ten-year vision, it was

certainly not the end of the effort. The two rose gardens will never be entirely finished. Varieties discovered in the future will join their “elders.” Other villages, no doubt, will join the bandwagon and add their support to the Path of Roses.

After their unforeseen sojourn in my garden, the roses have at last begun life anew in the soil of their origin. This wonderful adventure, my quest for endangered roses, has been joined by many others who are passionate about preserving their horticultural heritage and who recognize that in this world the rose rightly holds a special place in all our hearts. It is high time, for soon there will be no more abandoned cemeteries in the Ardennes.



For the last twelve years, JEAN-CLAUDE NICOLAS has become well known among les Amis de la Roseraie du Val-de-Marne à l'Haÿ-les-Roses through his writings, his service on the board of the Friends of l'Haÿ-les-Roses, and his visits to that famous rose garden. His passionate interest in roses found in the cemeteries of the Ardennes, the region of France where he was born, led him on a journey of discovery, research, rose rescue, and restoration. M. Nicolas resides in the South of France in the Drome region, near the historic village of La Bégude-de-Mazenc.

The Ardennes

The Ardennes is one of the original 83 départements of France that were created in 1790 with the French Revolution. It lies in a position of strategic importance along the border with Belgium near Luxembourg and Germany. A geographic and cultural region that encompasses territories that now reside in Belgium and Luxembourg, the hilly, forested terrain of the Ardennes rises from the coastal marshlands of Flanders and arches towards the Rhine river valley in the east. The location has placed the Ardennes squarely in the path of major battles of the First and Second World Wars, including the Battle of the Bulge. Among many notable Ardennais are Robert de Sorbon (1201–1274), founder of the school that ultimately became the Université de Paris; Guillaume de Maschaut (1284–1370), medieval poet and composer; and Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), one of France's greatest poets and author of *Le Bateau ivre* (*The Drunken Boat*).



FRANCE: Ardennes in the North, and Drome in the South.

MAP: A close view of one small section of the Ardennes, the Pointe de Givet, an extension of the French border that juts into the Belgian Ardennes. Courtesy Michelin Maps.